

An Introduction to the Dasopanishads

"In the whole world there is no study so beneficial and elevating as that of the Upanishads. It has been the solace of my life; it will be the solace of my death."

Schopenhauer - A German philosopher

Upanishads are the full blossomed flowers on the tree of Vedas. They are also called Vedanta, which really means the goal of Veda. The word Upanishad means 'sitting devotedly near.' It is the secret teaching of spiritual wisdom imparted in private to worthy pupils.

The works that go by the name Upanishad exceeds 1000 in number. But only few are available today. MUKTIKOPANISAD gives a list of 108 Upanishads. Even the introduction to all the Upanishads, will surely occupy many a voluminous text.

JAGADGURU SRI ADI SANKARACHARYA, the earliest commentator, wrote his commentary on ten Upanishads (DASOPANISADS). SRIMAD RAMANUJACHARYA tried to amplify some of their concepts in his 'Vedantha Sangraha'. SRI MADHVACHARYA wrote the brief commentaries on these ten Upanishads.

The trend of the Upanishads is generally against ritualism and strongly favors Upasana and Jnana (Meditation and Wisdom). Here we must note that for the one who has transcended the worldly affairs, all rituals are but the secondary details.

The great masters say that the study of the Dasopanishads will reveal to the student the nature of Individual Self and the Supreme Self, and thus help in the path of self realization. The names of the ten Upanishads respectively are-

*"Isa Kena Katha Prasna Mundaka Mandukya thithiri
Aitareyancha Chandogyam Brihadaranyakam dasa."*

ISAVASYA UPANISHAD

This Upanishad is in the end of the Sukla Yajurveda Samhita. This is a small Upanishad with 18 mantras. This Upanishad starts with the words '*Isavsyam Idam Sarvam....*' hence the name Isavasya Upanishad. Many scholars wrote their commentaries on this Upanishad.

It says that the whole world is pervaded by the Isa of the Supreme Brahman. It advocates that one should not cease the actions (Karma) but should work and live the full span of life. It beautifully describes the nature of Atman and declares that the one who has realized this Atman transcends sorrow and delusion.

KENA UPANISHAD

This Upanishad is in the Talavakara Brahmana of Jaimini sakha of Samaveda. This is also called Talavakara Upanishad. This has four chapters and 35 mantras. This Upanishad gets its name by its very first word 'Kena' which means 'by what.' The question which is the base of depth psychology was asked in the very opening verse of this Upanishad 'Willed by whom does the directed mind goes towards its Object ?

This Upanishad has a beautiful exposition on the Self, which is the eye of the eye, ear of ear, mind of the mind etc.

The Supreme Self can only be experienced. One can never become the knower of the Self, for to know one must inevitably be separate from the Self ! This Upanishad says- "It is known to him to whom It is unknown; he does not know to whom It is known. It is unknown to those who know well and known to those who do not know".

The second half of this Upanishad has a didactical parable of the gods and the Brahman. All gods became very much elated after being victorious in the battle against the demons. In their joy of victory, they forgot that this victory was due to the grace of the Brahman. To teach them a lesson the supreme Brahman appeared before them in the form of a Yaksha. They could not exhibit their super natural potentials before that Yaksha. Finally

Indra, the chief of gods went to inquire. From him the Yaksha vanished away and in that very place appeared the divine mother Uma Haimavathi and taught Indra about Brahman.

This Upanishad specially mentions the basic disciplines needed to attain knowledge of Brahman and ends with these following words - "Any one who knows Brahman to be supreme reality, he, having dispelled sin, remains firmly seated in the boundless, blissful and the supreme Brahman".

KATHOPANISHAD

This Upanishad is in the Kathaka sakha of Krishna Yajurveda. It is also called Kathakopanishad. This Upanishad has 6 chapters and 119 mantras.

This Upanishad starts with the story of Vajassravasaan and his son Nachiketa. This story is very symbolical. Nachiketa goes to Yamaloka, the abode of the god of death.

The main teaching of this Upanishad is in the form of a dialogue between the small Nachiketa and Yama raja, the god of death. Yama raja teaches his the spiritual wisdom.

"Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached"

Swami Vivekananda's call to the nation was a reflection of a verse of this Upanishad.

The gist of the teachings of this Upanishad:

1. The Self cannot be known through much study or through the intellect or through much hearing.
2. Know the Self as the master of the chariot, and the body as the chariot. Know the intellect as the charioteer and the mind as verily the bridle.
3. In Brahman the sun does not shine, neither do the moon and the stars; nor do these flashes of lightning shine. How can this fire? He shining all these shine; through His luster all these are variously illuminated.
4. When all desires clinging to one's heart fall off, then a mortal becomes immortal and he attains Brahman here.

PRASNA UPANISHAD

This Upanishad belongs to the Atharvana Veda. This is in the form of questions and answers. Hence it has been named as Prasnopanishad. (Prasna means a "Question")

This has 6 chapters and 67 mantras. Six aspirants approached a great sage called 'Pippalada' and requested Him to answer their queries. The sage, after testing their sincerity for one year, consented to answer their questions. The six questions which this Upanishad answers are:

1. From what indeed are all these beings born?
2. How many in fact are the deities that sustain a creature? Which among them exhibit this glory? Which again, is the chief among them?
3. From where is this Prana born? How does it come into this body? How again does it dwell by dividing himself? How does it depart? How does it support the external things and how the physical?
4. Which are the organs that go to sleep in the person? Which keep awake in him? Which deity experiences dream? To whom occurs this happiness? In whom do all get merged?
5. Which world does one really win thereby who among men, intently meditates on OM in that wonderful way till death?

6. Where does the Purusha exist?

MUNDAKA UPANISHAD

This Upanishad is in Atharvana Veda. It has 3 chapters with 6 sections and 64 mantras. The word 'Mundaka' means a cleanly shaven head. This Upanishad might have derived this name because of its teachings which can be comprehended only by the refined minds.

This Upanishad tells us about the Akshara Para Brahman, which is beyond dissolution and destruction. Akshara means imperishable. Here it means both 'sound and letter'. OM is the origin for the both. OM is the greatest medium to reach this Akshara Para Brahman. Hence this Upanishad says OM is the bow, the soul is the arrow; and Brahman is called its target. It is to be hit by an unerring man. One should become one with it just like an arrow.

This Upanishad very beautifully gives the distinction between the individual self and the supreme self.

Two birds that are ever associated and have similar names cling to the same tree (body). Of these, one (the Individual Self) eats the fruit of diverged tastes, and the other looks on without eating. The Individual Self remains drowned in the waters of ignorance and means, being worried by its impotence. When it sees the other the adored lord and His glory, then it becomes liberated by the sorrow.

The great declaration that the truth alone triumphs and not untruth

(SATYAMEVA JAYATE NAANRUTHAM) is in this Upanishad.

MANDUKYA UPANISHAD

This Upanishad belongs to the Atharvana Veda. This is a very small Upanishad comprising of only 12 mantras. Though it is very small, the potency of its teaching has occupied a very prominent place.

'Manduka' means Frog. A frog will not move step by step. It jumps. Similarly this Upanishad takes a leap from the three states of consciousness (Jagrat, Swapna and Sushupti) and deals about the Turiya, the fourth state, also called the transcendental state of consciousness.

Some scholars argue that this Upanishad was revealed to Varuna Deva, the god of rains, who is in the form of a frog and hence the name Mandukya Upanishad.

This Upanishad delves straight away into the sublime philosophy of Pranava (Om), the Atman and the Brahman. It says that it is impossible to describe the nature of the eternal truth called Brahman since He is Achintya (beyond thought) and Alkshana (beyond characteristics).

TAITTRIYA UPANISHAD

This Upanishad belongs to the Krishna Yajurveda. This is the most widely studied Upanishad. This has 3 chapters called Shikshavalli, Anandavalli and Briguvalli.

Shikshavalli speaks about the instruction of Education. The last part of this Shikshavalli is the parting message to the student, who, having finished his study, is about to leave the Gurukulam. This is called Sishyanusasanam. The teacher instructs the student about the necessary duties:

"Speak truth. Practice righteousness. Make no mistake about the study.... Do not terminate the line of progeny. There should be no inadvertence about truth. There should be no deviation from righteous activity. There should be no mistake about your protection. Do not neglect propitious activities. Do not be careless about learning and teaching..... Let your mother be a goddess unto you. Let your father, your teacher and your guest be a god unto you."

Anandavalli describes the eternal Bliss which shines above the Anandamaya Kosa (the sheath of Bliss which transcends the other four called Annamaya Kosa - the sheath of food, Pranamaya Kosa - the sheath of

mind and Vignamamaya Kosa - the sheath of intellect). It also describes the other four sheaths.

It also says that one is not subjected to fear at any time if one knows the Bliss that is Brahman, failing to reach which, words along with the mind turn back.

Brighuvalli is the teaching given to sage Brighu by his father Varuna. This teaching is not mere information but the instruction to experience the divine by ones own efforts. He encourages his son Brighu to do penance and get the experience of the Brahman. Brighu in course of his penance transcends all Kosas and finally gets established in the supreme Brahman.

This Upanishad has not neglected the earthly life. It says that one, having established in supreme Brahman should not deprecate and discard food (i.e., the earthly life). One should make food plentiful.

AITAREYA UPANISHAD

Aitareya Upanishad is in the end of the Aitareya Aranyaka of the Rigveda. This Upanishad has 4 chapters with 6 sections and 33 mantras. As this was revealed to a sage called Mahidasa Aitareya, this Upanishad is called Aitareya Upanishad.

This Upanishad says that the Supreme Lord desired to create the world and has created this without the aid of any other thing, by Himself. It also describes the birth, the metamorphosis, the death and the rebirth of the Jeevatman. It contains a story of sage Vamadeva who succeeded in getting the spiritual wisdom even while in the womb of his mother and became free.

The last section of this Upanishad gives a clear exposition about the direct experience of the supreme self and also on the distinction between the mind and pure consciousness.

It declares that the pure consciousness is Brahman - (Prajnanam Brahma)

CHANDOGYA UPANISHAD

This Upanishad is in the Chandogya Brahamana of Samaveda. This has 8 chapters with 154 sections and 628 mantras.

It begins with the Upasana of OM. It speaks of so many Vidyas like Aksi Vidya, Akasa Vidya, Madhu Vidya, Sandilya Vidya, Prana Vidya, Panchagni Vidya etc., These Vidyas help us to realize the Paramatman or Supreme Self. The last chapter talks about the Dahara Vidya, which is the meditation on the self within the small space of the heart.

This Upanishad contains didactical stories of Satyakama and Swethakethu . One of the chapters of this Upanishad is in the form of a dialogue between sage Sanathkumara and his disciple Narada. Sanathkumara takes Narada step by step from Ahara Suddhi (purification of food) to the realization of Bhooma or Brahman.

This Upanishad concludes with a statement of a liberated soul about His being free from all sins and attaining the abode of Brahman.

BRIHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD

This Upanishad is the Aranyaka of Sukla Yajurveda with 6 chapters, 47 sections and 435 mantras. 'Brihat' means very big. This Upanishad is the biggest of all the ten Upanishads. Generally an Upanishad is seen in the end of the Aranyaka part of the Veda. But this Upanishad is the total Aranyaka itself.

The first two chapters of this Upanishad are called Madhu Kanda. The next two are called Muni Kanda and the last two Khila Kanda.

Madhu means nectar. Madhu Kanda describes the Atman, which is even beyond the gods. For the One, who has realized this Atman, the whole world will appear as a divine entity. He enjoys constantly the nectar of Bliss of Immortality.

Muni Kanda presents sage Yajnavalkya at His best. His teachings on Vedanta have been very effectively presented in this Kanda. He establishes the true nature of the Atman, by an analysis of the three states of Consciousness, as the ever free blissful self. A description of the Jiva suffering at the time of death and his transmigration also find a place in these teachings, to induce Vairagya.

The last kanda contains all those teachings which are in a scattered form. 'Khila' means that which is scattered. (If the scattered parts are brought together, then it is called Akhila). This contains a number of Upasanas. It talks about the need to have self-control, to inculcate the divine qualities like compassion and giving gifts to the needy and Panchagni Vidya (The doctrine of five fires).

This Upanishad ends with a long list of great Rishis.